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SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Young Dutch people's everyday experiences of romance and sexuality: A mixed-method approach

Wieke G. Dalenberg^{1*}, Margaretha C. Timmerman¹, Paul L.C. Van Geert² and Elske S. Kunnen²

Abstract: *Objectives:* This exploratory study assessed young Dutch people's emerging sexual experiences in everyday life, in addition to examine the feasibility of a mixed-methods diary study. *Methods:* Using one-week diaries, 12- to 17-year-olds recorded qualitative reports of their everyday romantic and sexual experiences. *Results:* The qualitative findings identify "Making Contact" as a profound theme; however, it was expressed differently for each romantic and sexual experience. Contrary to the general idea, girls did not report more about romantic topics than boys did, nor did boys report more about sexual activities than girls did. *Conclusions:* Our findings highlight the importance of incorporating a broad spectrum of everyday-life romantic and sexual experiences in future research, and have provided valuable support for the implementation of a forthcoming two-year diary study.

Subjects: Intimate Relations; Psychological Science; Research Methods in Development Studies

Keywords: adolescent sexuality; love/romantic; mixed-methods diary; everyday life

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction

In their literature review on romantic relationships of young people, Collins, Welsh, and Furman (2009) observe that scholars have devoted little attention to romantic experiences other than

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Previous research has devoted little attention to romantic experiences other than romantic relationships. However, young people can be very concerned with romance and sexuality, even if they have not actually had sexual intercourse or a romantic relationship. In this study, we tested a diary method among 183 young people (12-17 years old) to capture the broad range of romantic experiences. Making contact with a (potential) romantic partner did seem to be important for young people; however, this was expressed differently for each romantic and sexual experience. Additionally, contrary to the general assumption, girls are, in everyday life, no more concerned with romantic issues than boys are, nor are boys more concerned with sexual activities than girls. Our findings highlight the importance of incorporating a broad spectrum of everyday-life romantic experiences in future research, and have provided valuable support for the implementation of a forthcoming two-year diary study.

romantic relationships. Romantic experiences comprise a large category of activities, cognitions, and emotions that do not necessarily involve any direct relationship with a romantic partner. Fantasies about a significant other, being deeply in love, or making initial contact are also important romantic experiences. Young people can be very concerned with romance and sexuality, even if they have not actually had sexual intercourse or a romantic relationship (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999; Collins et al., 2009; Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006).

The romantic and sexual experiences of young people can be measured in several ways. Most existing studies are retrospective, based on questionnaires that include pre-described lists of items to be measured. Although these studies present interesting findings on romantic and sexual experiences, they do not provide insight into personal, often more complex, experiences in everyday life. Little is known about the ways in which young people express and emotionally evaluate sexual experiences (Lefkowitz & Vasilenko, 2014; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008).

This study has two objectives, one empirical and the other methodological. The empirical objective is to examine how young people experience their romantic and sexual development in everyday life. The methodological objective is to reflect upon the use of a mixed-method diary study in generating knowledge about the ways in which young people perceive their everyday romantic and sexual lives.

1.2. Romantic and sexual experiences

As they grow older, young people develop an increasing interest in romance and sexuality, in addition to becoming increasingly involved in romantic and sexual activities (De Graaf, Kruijjer, Van Acker, & Meijer, 2012; Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005). For example, older and more sexually experienced young Dutch people have been shown to make more sexual and romantic references on social network sites (Doornwaard, Moreno, van den Eijnden, Vanwesenbeeck, & ter Bogt, 2014).

While few empirical studies have addressed romantic fantasies or feelings, developmental theories do include romantic experiences ranging from the very first naïve individual thoughts and fantasies, to steady relationships and having sexual intercourse (Brown, 1999; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1994). The research literature on romantic and sexual development generally distinguishes three stages: an initial stage of romantic affiliation, a middle stage of short-lived dating, and a final stage involving the consolidation of a romantic relationship (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011; Meier & Allen, 2009). In one interview study, young Israeli people aged 14–15 years and 16–17 years reported more experiences with romantic fantasies than they did with romantic relationships (Tuval-Mashiach, Walsh, Harel, & Shulman, 2008).

The initial stage of romantic affiliation is characterized by feelings of attraction and desire, with negligible contact between the potential romantic partners; an example of this is when a young person in this stage has a crush on someone. Having a crush on someone is quite common in young people's lives. In a study among North American young people aged 12–14 years, the majority reported having at least one current other-sex crush (Bowker, Spencer, Thomas, & Gyoerkoe, 2012). In the Netherlands 87% of 12–13-year-olds have had at least once a crush on someone (De Graaf et al., 2012). Thinking about other-sex peers increases as young people grow older, and young people spend a great deal of their time thinking about other-sex peers and romantic issues before they actually interact with other-sex peers (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004; Richards, Crowe, Larson, & Swarr, 1998). Studies conducted in North America found that girls between 10 and 14 years of age spend more time thinking about other-sex and same-sex peers than boys of the same age do, and they are more likely to report on current crushes (Bowker et al., 2012; Richards et al., 1998). As young people grow older, thinking about the opposite sex tends to be associated with less positive feelings, relative to having real-life contact with the opposite sex (Richards et al., 1998). It is common for young people to wish and fantasize about talking with a girl or boy they like (Jackson, Jacob, Landman-Peeters, & Lanting, 2001; Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2008). However, young people often feel insecure and are reluctant to initiate contact.

In the middle stage of short-lived dating, young people explore romantic relationships through actual interactions with potential romantic partners. A longitudinal study among German 14-year-olds showed that between 14 and 17 years of age, young people experience a reduction of stressors and an increase in the ability to start dating (Nieder & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001). By interacting within peer groups, young North American people become increasingly familiar with how to make contact with a significant other (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000). Among a sample of Belgium 16-year olds, boys are more likely than girls to take a direct approach to arrange a date (Jackson et al., 2001).

The final stage of romantic development involves the consolidation of a dyadic romantic relationship. These relationships resemble adult romantic relationships (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). Young people experience these romantic relationships as serious and exclusive, with high levels of companionship and emotional support. Romantic relationships may be a source of enhanced self-esteem or social competence, and they can contribute to the development of a positive self-concept or higher self-assurance (Collins, 2003; Furman, Ho, & Low, 2007). In one interview study among European Americans, young girls focused more on interpersonal qualities when describing their romantic relationships, whereas boys focused more on physical attraction (Feiring, 1996). Other studies among European Americans and Canadians have indicated that girls are more competent in personal and emotional disclosures within romantic relationships, in addition to demonstrating greater intimacy and self-consciousness (McIsaac, Connolly, McKenney, Pepler, & Craig, 2008; Montgomery, 2005).

Romantic relationships are one of the most important contexts in which young people have sexual intercourse (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2000). Overall, Dutch and American young people and emerging adults rate their experiences with sexual intercourse positively (O'Sullivan & Hearn, 2008; van de Bongardt, Reitz, & Deković, 2015; Vasilenko, Lefkowitz, & Maggs, 2012).

1.3. Methods used in capturing romantic and sexual experiences

In the past decade, researchers have undergone a transition in the methods that they use to study the romantic and sexual experiences of young people, shifting the focus away from questionnaires toward observational methods, interviews, and other qualitative methods (Collins et al., 2009). Given their subjective and personal nature, romantic and sexual experiences are difficult to examine with observational measures. In contrast, interviews are particularly suitable for exploring personal meaning-making with regard to romantic and sexual experiences (Feiring, 1996; Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2008). Interviews are not anonymous, however, and the presence of the interviewer might influence the young person being interviewed (Feiring, 1996). It is commonly known that many young people are reluctant to answer questions on intimate and sexual matters, particularly when interviewed by an adult (e.g. parent, teacher, or other professional) (Buston, Wight, & Scott, 2001; Timmerman, 2004, 2009). Research showed that both self-administered questionnaires and face-to-face interviews yield reliable assessments, although self-administered questionnaires are more accurate with regard to specific sexual behaviors (Durant & Carey, 2000).

In diary studies, participants report about experiences within a shorter time frame (e.g. a day or a week), thus reducing the amount of recall error (Nezlek, 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008; McAuliffe, DiFranceisco, & Reed, 2007). Previous research showed that diary studies produce the most accurate reports of sexual behavior, as compared to other modes of administration (Downey, Ryan, Roffman, & Kulich, 1995; McLaws, Oldenburg, Ross, & Cooper, 1990). Another advantage is that the salience of reports recorded in diaries contributes to their accuracy. Personally relevant experiences are remembered better than general experiences (Nezlek, 2011).

1.4. This study

The primary objective of this study is to examine how young people experience their romantic and sexual development in their everyday lives. A second objective is to examine the feasibility of a one-week diary method. Although this research is exploratory, we were guided by several hypotheses. In our diary study, we explore the topics that young people report in their diaries and the extent to which their romantic and sexual experiences can be categorized into distinct stages of romantic

development (Hypothesis 1), that is, an initial stage of romantic affiliations, middle stage of short-lived dating, and a final stage consisting of a romantic relationship (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011; Meier & Allen, 2009). Second, based on previous research, we expect that girls tend to report more about romance and sexuality than boys do, and that the same also holds true for older (as compared to younger) adolescents, and for those with more (as compared to less) experience (Hypothesis 2) (Bowker et al., 2012; Connolly et al., 2004; De Graaf et al., 2012; Doornwaard et al., 2014; Mosher et al., 2005; Richards et al., 1998). Third, we expect that young people tend to report less about romantic relationships in their diaries than they do about romantic affiliations (Hypothesis 3), because the research literature shows that younger adolescents have, on average, less experience with romantic relationships (De Graaf et al., 2012). In addition, we expect that older adolescents are more likely to report about higher stages of romantic development and about physical sexual contact (Hypothesis 4), since they could, generally speaking, be expected to be more experienced (Connolly et al., 2004; De Graaf et al., 2012; Richards et al., 1998). We further expect girls to report more about romantic aspects of sexuality and boys to report more about physical (sexual) behavior (Hypothesis 5), because previous research has shown that girls are more focused on interpersonal qualities and boys more on physical attraction (Feiring, 1996; McIsaac et al., 2008; Montgomery, 2005). In addition, we hypothesize the feelings elicited by romantic affiliation to be less positive than those elicited by actually spending time with a date, romantic partner, or significant other (Hypothesis 6) (Jackson et al., 2001; Nieder & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001; Richards et al., 1998). Previous research has shown that young people evaluated their sexual experiences as positive (O'Sullivan & Hearn, 2008; van de Bongardt et al., 2015; Vasilenko et al., 2012). Therefore, we further expect young people to rate physical sexual contact more positively than negatively (Hypothesis 7). In addition to investigating these hypotheses, we have offered a qualitative exploration of individual expressions within the three stages of romantic and sexual experiences in order to identify the profound themes for each stage of romantic development.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The participants in this study were 183 students in the seventh (20%), eighth (30%), ninth (22%), and tenth (28%) grades in one pre-vocational secondary high school in the Northern part of the Netherlands. The sample consisted of 58% girls (Mage = 14.86 years old; range = 12.5–17.4 years) and 42% boys (Mage = 14.8; range = 12.7–16.6 years). With three exceptions, all of the participants were born in the Netherlands. The non-response rate was 20%.

2.2. Procedure

Participants were recruited from one small-to-average pre-vocational secondary high school (i.e. approximately 500 students) in the northern part of the Netherlands. Information about the research project was sent to the home addresses. Participants volunteered to join the study after parental and their own consent. Each participant was asked to complete a qualitative one-week diary in a classroom setting. At least two researchers were present at the moment of data collection in order to introduce the study, to clarify the diary questions whenever necessary, and to ensure privacy. Participants completed the online diary questions on a secure survey website in the classroom during regular school hours. Computers were isolated from each other, in order to ensure privacy. Prior to data collection, the study was approved by the Ethical Committee Psychology (ECP: *Ethische Commissie Psychologie*). The ECP evaluates research conducted by the Department of Psychology at the University of Groningen according to ethical standards.

2.3. Measures

The measures were developed in our ongoing qualitative diary study, which is a part of Project STARS (Studies on Trajectories of Adolescent Relations and Sexuality). For this study, we used a qualitative one-week diary method.

2.3.1. *Diary reports*

Participants were asked to write about a romantic and sexual experience that had been on their mind in the past week: “Think about it. What was most on your mind last week: friendship, a romantic crush, or a romantic relationship? Please choose one topic as a base for answering the following questions.” First, participants were asked to respond to a multiple-choice question with an open-answer choice regarding the topic to which the romantic and sexual experience referred: “friendship,” “romantic infatuation/crush,” “romantic relationship,” “sex,” “family,” “a fight,” or “something else (please specify) ...” Although this question was accompanied by a multiple-choice response set, participants also had the opportunity to provide open-ended answers. This allowed them to write down any event or thought, reporting on their romantic and sexual experience in their own words without any restrictions concerning the length of the text. The participants were further asked to describe what they had wished for and what they had actually done at the time of the event or, in the case of internal experiences, what they had wished for and wanted to do.

2.3.2. *Emotions*

In order to measure the evaluation of the romantic and sexual experience, participants were asked to indicate how they felt about their romantic and sexual experiences, using a Likert scale ranging from 0 (“not at all”) to 10 (“a lot”). Eleven emotions were presented, divided into positive emotions (e.g. happiness, pride, relief, satisfaction) and negative emotions (e.g. anger, sadness, fear, embarrassment, guilt). Positive and negative emotions were calculated by averaging the positive and negative emotions separately for each romantic and sexual experience (i.e. each diary report). This generated two variables for each romantic and sexual experience: average positive evaluation and average negative evaluation.

2.3.3. *Feasibility*

To obtain further insight into the feasibility of the diary method, participants were asked to rate the importance of their romantic and sexual experiences, using a Likert scale ranging from 0 (“not at all important”) to 10 (“very important”). Finally, the participants were asked to join a two-year follow-up study (yes/no/don’t know yet). Participants could provide open-ended statements concerning their reasons for not wishing to be involved in the future study.

2.3.4. *Demographic information; romantic and sexual history*

We used the participants’ birthdates to calculate their exact age at the time of the data collection. Gender was determined according to the following question: “Are you a boy or a girl?” (boy/girl).

Participants were asked whether they had a crush on somebody (yes/no), whether they had ever had a romantic relationship (yes/no), and whether they were in a romantic relationship at the time of the data collection (yes/no). Participants reported whether they had ever experienced French kissing (yes/no) and whether they had ever engaged in sexual activity that could be described as beyond fondling under the clothing (yes/no).

2.4. *Data analysis*

This paper used a mixed-method approach. The qualitative diary descriptions were qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed. First, with respect to the qualitative analysis, the everyday experiences of the participants were coded according to the Constant Comparative Method (CCM) of content analysis (Boeije, 2010). This method consists of a stepwise comparison of the content of the diaries. The main themes—Romance and Sexuality, Peers, Family, Other, and Private—were coded in the following way. The reports were classified according to the following question: “What suits the topic best? You may choose more than one topic from the list.” All reports referring to “having a crush on someone,” “romantic relationship,” and “sex” were coded as Romance and Sexuality. Reports referring to other topics were coded as other.

The first hypothesis concerns the possibility of classifying the diary reports into stages of romantic development. To investigate this hypothesis, the main theme of Romance and Sexuality was further

Table 1. Coding for categories of romantic and sexual experiences

Romantic and sexual category	Explanation
1. Romantic affiliation	Internal representation. Thinking about a significant other; liking someone in particular; having a crush on someone
2. Romantic affiliation and contact	Internal representation and actual interaction. Thinking about a significant other; liking someone in particular; having a crush on someone, <i>and</i> having had contact with that person in real life or through the internet
3. Romantic relationship	All experiences within the context of a romantic relationship
4. Physical (sexual) contact	Wanting, thinking about, or having physical (sexual) contact (e.g. French kissing, sexual desire)

coded in three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Boeije, 2010). In the open-coding step, comparison of a selection of the diary reports resulted in the construction of tentative coding names for the Romance and Sexual categories. Close reading and continuous comparison of the diary reports allowed the researchers to become familiar with the data. Consensus emerged with regard to the most frequent categories, and a coding scheme was gradually constructed. In the axial-coding step, the codes were applied to the rest of the sample, thereby reducing the number of codes and making them more definite. The final step (i.e. selective coding) consisted of matching the codes to the literature on stages of romantic development (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011; Meier & Allen, 2009).

The coding procedure ultimately generated three categories: (1) Romantic affiliation; (2) Romantic affiliation and contact; (3) Romantic relationship. An additional category was constructed for physical (sexual) contact (see Table 1 for an overview). The three stages of romantic development could be co-classified with the category physical (sexual) contact. The remaining reports could not be grouped into the aforementioned codes and were coded as either private (e.g. “It is too private to describe”) or something else (e.g. “...”). Inter-observer reliability was calculated using Cohen’s kappa, with values > 0.70 considered reliable.

Second, concerning the quantitative analysis, independent *t*-tests were used in order to investigate Hypothesis 2 (concerning whether girls, more experienced, and older participants reported more about romance and sexuality than did boys, less experienced, and younger participants, respectively). For Hypotheses 3–7, chi-square analyses and Fisher’s exact tests were used to compare the number and proportion of codes for the categories (1) Romantic affiliation; (2) Romantic affiliation with contact; (3) Romantic relationship; and (4) physical (sexual) contact. In addition, related-samples Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used to examine the difference between the median positive and negative emotions within each category.

We examined the feasibility of the diary method through close reading of the content of the diary entries (Hypotheses 1–7). Preliminary results regarding how many and which romantic and sexual topics were reported can be used to improve the diary method and to provide valid information. We also examined the relative importance of the romantic and sexual topics to the participants who reported them. In addition, we determined how many participants were willing to participate in the follow-up diary study, and we coded the reasons that participants gave for not wishing to join the forthcoming two-year diary study.

The qualitative and quantitative analyses were examined with Excel and SPSS version 20.0, respectively.

3. Results

3.1. Romance and sexuality diary reports

In the diaries, approximately half of the participants ($n = 89$; 49%) reported topics relating to Romance and Sexuality. The rest of the reports concerned Peers ($n = 53$; 29%), Family ($n = 12$; 7%) or

Table 2. Differences in gender, age, romantic experience, and intimate behavior of the Romance and Sexuality (R&S) sample vs. the rest of the sample

		R&S sample (n = 89)	Non-R&S (n = 94)
Sample size	n	89	94
Gender* (%)	Boy	35	49
	Girl	65	51
Age*	(years)	15	14.6
Romantic experiences (%)	Ever had a crush on someone*	98	90
	Ever had a romantic relationship*	96	82
	Currently in a romantic relationship*	52	12
Intimate behavior (%)	Ever engaged in French kissing*	84	44
	Ever had sexual experience beyond fondling under the clothing*	40	19

Note: R&S sample = participants who reported about romance and sexuality in the diary.

*Difference between R&S sample and non-R&S sample ($p < 0.05$).

Other experiences ($n = 29$; 16%). Not all 89 reports about Romance and Sexuality could be coded into the three stages of romantic development and the additional code of physical (sexual) contact. A total of 57 (64%) out of the 89 reports were coded into the three stages of romantic development and physical (sexual) contact. As expected, everyday romantic and sexual experiences could be classified into various stages of romantic development (Hypothesis 1). The rest ($n = 31$; 35%) of the 89 reports about Romance and Sexuality were coded as either Private ($n = 9$; 10%) or other experiences within the Romance and Sexuality ($n = 13$; 15%). A few qualitative reports ($n = 9$; 10%) could not be coded, as they did not contain sufficient information.

Participants who did include reports relating to the theme Romance and Sexuality ($n = 89$) were compared to those who did not include such reports ($n = 94$), see Table 2.

In all, 35% of the boys and 65% of the girls reported topics relating to the theme of Romance and Sexuality. Compared to the rest of the sample, significantly fewer boys and significantly more girls wrote diary reports relating to this theme ($\chi^2(1, N = 183) = 3.732, p = 0.053$). The mean age of the participants who reported about Romance and Sexuality ($M_{age} = 15$; $SD = 1.22$) was significantly higher than that of the participants who did not include Romance and Sexuality reports ($M_{age} = 14.6$; $SD = 1.2$), $t(181) = 2.371, p = 0.019$.

Almost all of the participants who included reports relating to Romance and Sexuality ($n = 89$) also indicated that they had experienced a crush on someone (98%). This percentage was significantly higher than in the rest of the sample ($\chi^2(1, N = 183) = 4.344, p = 0.037$). In addition, significantly more participants with reports relating to Romance and Sexuality had experienced romantic relationships (96% vs. 82%) and were currently involved in romantic relationships (52% vs. 12%), as compared to other participants ($n = 94$): respectively $\chi^2(1, N = 183) = 8.312, p = 0.004$ and $\chi^2(1, N = 183) = 34.078, p < 0.001$. Participants with reports relating to Romance and Sexuality were also significantly more likely to report French kissing (85%), and experience with fondling under the clothing (40%) than were the other participants (44% and 19%, respectively): $\chi^2(1, N = 183) = 32.555, p < 0.001$ and $\chi^2(1, N = 183) = 9.972, p = 0.002$. As expected, girls, older, and more experienced participants were more inclined to report about romance and sexuality than were boys, younger, and less experienced participants, respectively (Hypothesis 2).

3.2. Content analysis of romance and sexuality diary reports

The reports were further coded into four categories: three stages of romantic development and one category of physical (sexual) contact. Most of the reports (48 of 57 reports, 84%) could be classified within one of the three stages of romantic development: (1) Romantic affiliation ($n = 9$; 15%; 6 girls, 3 boys), (2) Romantic affiliation and contact ($n = 9$, 15%; 7 girls, 2 boys), (3) Romantic Relationship ($n = 30$, 51%; 21 girls, 9 boys). Chi-square analysis revealed significant differences between the distribution of the three stages of romantic development ($\chi^2(3, N = 48) = 18.375, p < 0.001$) (Table 3). Contrary to our expectations, most of the participants reported about stage 3: romantic relationships (Hypothesis 3). The numbers of participants with reports relating to physical (sexual) contact ($n = 20$; 35%) and those with no such reports ($n = 37$; 65%) are presented in Table 4. Six reports (11%; 5 girls, 1 boy) were about French kissing, and 14 reports (25%; 11 girls, 3 boys) were about sex.

Contrary to our expectations (Hypothesis 4), the results of independent-samples Kruskal-Wallis tests revealed no significant age differences between the stages of romantic development ($\chi^2(2, N = 48) = 1.007, p = 0.604$) or with regard to reporting about physical (sexual) contact ($U(N = 57) = 428.5, p = 0.313$). To calculate the distribution of boys and girls within each stage of romantic development, we used Fisher's exact tests, given that the expected cell count was less than five. The results indicated no significant differences in the distribution of boys and girls for reports about romantic affiliation ($p = 0.542$), romantic affiliation with Contact ($p = 0.458$), or romantic relationship ($p = 0.603$). Chi-square analyses revealed no significant differences in the distribution of boys and girls with regard to physical (sexual) contact, as compared to No physical (sexual) contact: ($\chi^2(1, N = 57) = 1.421, p = 0.233$). Contrary to our expectations, both boys and girls were equally inclined to report about different Stages of Romantic Development and physical (sexual) contact with a current or potential romantic partner (Hypothesis 5).

Table 3. Differences in age, gender, and positive and negative emotions concerning romantic experiences

Stage	Reports (%)	Positive emotions		Negative emotions		Gender		Age	
		M (SD)	Mdn	M (SD)	Mdn	B	G	M (SD)	Mdn
RA	9 (19)	3.02 (2.5)	2.5	3.0 (2.6)	3	3	6	14.6 (1.51)	14
RAC*	9 (19)	4.3 (3.3)	2.5	1.4 (1.2)	1.2	2	7	14.2 (1.5)	15
RR*	30 (62)	3.5 (3.0)	3.5	1.8 (1.8)	1.3	9	21	14.7 (1.1)	15
Total*	48 (100)	–	4	–	1.2	14	34	14.6 (1.3)	15

Notes: RA = Romantic affiliation; RAC = Romantic affiliation with contact; RR = Romantic relationship.

Total R&S experiences had more positive than negative emotions ($Z = 3.851, p < 0.001$).

Romantic Affiliation with contact had more positive than negative emotions ($Z = 1.960; p = 0.050$); romantic relationship had more positive than negative emotions ($Z = 2.380; p = 0.017$).

*Significant difference: More about romantic relationship vs. romantic affiliation and romantic affiliation with contact ($\chi^2(3, N = 48) = 18.375, p < 0.001$).

Table 4. Number of participants reporting about physical sexual contact (Sex) and those who did not (No sex)

Code	Reports (%)	Positive emotions		Negative emotions		Gender		Age	
		M (SD)	Mdn	M (SD)	Mdn	B	G	M (SD)	Mdn
Sex*	20 (35)	6.4 (2.4)	6.4	1.4 (1.8)	0.6	4	16	14.9 (1.1)	15
No sex	37 (65)	2.9 (2.9)	2.5	1.9 (2)	1.2	13	24	14.5 (1.3)	15
Total	57 (100)							14.67	

*Significant difference: Physical Sexual Contact had more positive than negative emotions ($Z = 3.808; p < 0.0001$);

Physical Sexual Contact had more positive emotions than did No Physical Sexual Contact ($U(N = 57) = 615.5, p < 0.001$).

3.3. Emotions

3.3.1. Romantic affiliation

Reports of nine participants were coded as romantic affiliation (15% of $n = 57$; 6 girls, 3 boys). Results of a related-samples Wilcoxon signed-rank test revealed no differences between the median of positive and negative emotions ($Z = 0.059$; $p = 0.953$). The reports of the participants reflected equal amounts of positive and negative emotions, indicating that they had mixed feelings with regard to romantic affiliation.

3.3.2. Romantic affiliation with contact

Nine participants (15% of $n = 57$; 7 girls, 2 boys) included reports coded as romantic affiliation with Contact. In contrast to reports relating to the first stage of romantic development, the results of a related-samples Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicated that participants evaluated experiences relating to romantic affiliation with Contact as more positive than negative ($MdnPos = 2.5$; $MdnNeg = 1.2$; $Z = 1.960$; $p = 0.05$).

3.3.3. Romantic relationship

Most of the participants reported romantic relationships (30 participants, 51% of $n = 57$; 21 girls, 9 boys). According to the results of a related-samples Wilcoxon signed-rank test, the participants evaluated experiences within their romantic relationships more positively than negatively ($MdnPos = 3.5$; $MdnNeg = 1.3$; $Z = 2.380$; $p = 0.017$).

3.3.4. Physical (sexual) contact

A total of 20 participants (35% of $n = 57$; 16 girls, 4 boys) reported on physical (sexual) contact (e.g. cuddling, kissing, and sexual intercourse). Similar to the second and third stage of romantic development, results from a related-samples Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed that participants evaluated reports about physical (sexual) contact significantly more positively than negatively ($MdnPos = 2.5$ vs. $MdnNeg = 0.6$; $Z = 3.808$; $p < 0.0001$).

In summary, participants generally reported more positive than negative emotions with regard to their romantic and sexual experiences. In particular, reports about contact with potential or actual romantic partners were evaluated as more positive than negative. As expected (Hypothesis 6), experiences with romantic affiliation were not evaluated as more positive than negative. Consistent with our expectations (Hypothesis 7), the participants evaluated physical (sexual) contact as positive.

3.4. Qualitative analysis

3.4.1. Romantic affiliation

The first stage of romantic development, romantic affiliation, was reflected in the reports of nine participants (15% of $n = 57$; 6 girls, 3 boys). One profound theme that emerges within this subcategory of romantic fantasies involves Making Contact with a Significant Other. Three of six girls with reports relating to this stage of romantic development indicated that they would like to have contact with a potential romantic partner, but that such contact was not possible or that they did not feel strong enough to act upon their desires in this regard:

[What exactly is the topic about?] I have a crush on someone. I wish I was not so shy, because I am too shy to get in touch with him. (P16, 16-year-old girl)

The following example from a 13-year-old boy illustrates the expressions of all the other participants (3 boys, 3 girls) who indicated that they were planning to make contact with potential romantic partners:

[What exactly is the topic about?] I had a crush on someone and I wanted to tell her. I will definitely ask her to be my girlfriend. (P13, 13-year-old boy)

3.4.2. Romantic affiliations with contact

Nine participants (15% of $n = 57$; 7 girls, 2 boys) included reports relating to romantic and sexual topics that were coded as stage 2, romantic affiliation with Contact. As was the case for reports relating to romantic affiliation, the most prominent theme within this sub-category was Making Contact, although it did not constitute a major issue. In this case, the participants reported that they were “only” talking with the significant other, suggesting that these participants did not feel shy or insecure, or that they had overcome their feelings of insecurity:

[What exactly is the topic about?] I was at a friend’s party, and I liked a girl who was also at the party. Her friends told me that she was also attracted to me. Right then, I wanted to make out with her. Anyway, I thought I was very cool when I met her, and now we are friends and she has already visited me at home once. (P21, 13-year-old boy)

3.4.3. Romantic relationship

Most participants reported on stage 3, romantic relationship (30 participants, 51% of $n = 57$; 21 girls, 9 boys). As was the case with romantic affiliation and romantic affiliation with Contact, participants reporting on romantic relationship expressed the desire to make contact. In this case, however, the participants were able to make contact with their romantic partners within the context of a romantic relationship, in which both participants have romantic feelings for each other. The following example illustrates that being in a romantic relationship ensures that participants are able to make contact whenever they wish.

[What exactly is the topic about?] It’s about my boyfriend. I wanted to be together and make out with him. We are in a romantic relationship, so I can just go to him. (P36, 14-year-old girl)

The participants seem to be self-confident in their expressions of Making Contact with their romantic partners, since they express no insecurity about any possible rejection. These participants are free to express and act on their desire for their romantic partners.

3.4.4. Physical (sexual) contact

A total of 20 participants (35% of $n = 57$; 16 girls, 4 boys) reported on physical (sexual) contact (e.g. cuddling, kissing, and sexual intercourse). Nine of these participants reported solely about physical (sexual) contact. Eleven reports could be coded as physical (sexual) contact *and* as romantic affiliations with contact (2 reports) or as romantic relationship (9 reports). Insecurities were not reported within any of the reports made concerning physical (sexual) contact. The participants were apparently self-confident in terms of desiring or having physical (sexual) contact:

[What exactly is the topic about?] I was thinking about my boyfriend, I really miss him. I wanted to go to him and cuddle with him. When I see him again, I’ll run up to him and kiss him. (P35, 13-year-old girl)

3.5. Importance of romantic and sexual topics and participation in a two-year diary study

On average, the 57 participants who reported on physical (sexual) contact rated the importance of the romantic and sexual topics about which they wrote as 8.1 on a 1–10 Likert scale, suggesting that the reported romantic and sexual experiences play an essential role in their lives. Nevertheless, not all of the participants in this study were inclined to participate in a two-year diary study. Of the total sample of 183 participants, 54 (29.5%; 33 girls, 21 boys) were willing to participate, while 97 (53%; 46 girls, 51 boys) indicated that they did not wish to participate in the future longitudinal, qualitative diary study. In addition, 32 participants (17.5%; 22 girls, 10 boys) indicated that they did not yet know if they would like to participate. Reasons for not participating in the follow-up study were as follows: do not feel like it ($n = 22$), no time ($n = 18$), boring ($n = 18$), duration ($n = 6$), difficult to answer personal questions ($n = 2$), do not like to answer personal questions ($n = 2$), do not want to give email address for further contact ($n = 1$), private reason ($n = 1$), parents would not allow it ($n = 1$), no reason ($n = 25$).

4. Discussion

4.1. Discussion

In contrast to previous studies, many of which are based on pre-described lists of concepts to be studied, the current study focuses on romantic and sexual experiences as it is lived in young people's everyday life. The study has two objectives. The empirical objective is to provide new findings on the subjective perceptions of everyday romantic and sexual experiences, and the methodological objective is to reflect on the feasibility of a mixed-method diary study.

First, the results demonstrated that everyday romantic and sexual experiences could be classified into various stages of romantic development. The participants reported mostly everyday experiences about a higher romantic developmental stage (i.e. experiences within a romantic relationship). Second, girls, older, and more experienced participants were more inclined to report everyday experiences about romance and sexuality than were boys, younger, and less experienced participants, respectively. However, no age or gender differences were found when we focused on what specific topics boys and girls, and younger and older adolescents, experience in their everyday lives. Third, the everyday romantic and sexual experiences were, in general, experienced as positive, with the exception of romantic affiliations (i.e. lower romantic developmental stage). Finally, the qualitative findings identify "Making Contact" as a profound theme; however, this was expressed differently for each romantic and sexual experience.

In line with the expectation based on previous studies, girls were more inclined than boys to report on *everyday* romantic and sexual experiences, and the same was true for older (as compared to younger) participants and those who were more (as compared to less) experienced (Bowker et al., 2012; De Graaf, et al., 2012; Doornwaard et al., 2014; Mosher et al., 2005; Richards et al., 1998). Although participants wrote unique everyday romantic and sexual experiences, as expected, the reported experiences could also be grouped together according to three distinct stages of romantic development: romantic affiliation (Initial Stage of romantic affiliation), romantic affiliation with Contact (Middle Stage of Short-Lived Dating) and romantic relationship (Final Stage of romantic relationship) (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011; Meier & Allen, 2009).

Contrary to our expectations, young people reported more about romantic relationship than they did about romantic affiliation, either with or without Contact (De Graaf, et al., 2012; Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2008). The inclusions of only pre-vocational secondary high school students may account for the relative high amount of experiences within romantic relationships. Pre-vocational high school students in the Netherlands report generally more advanced activities concerning their sexual development (than senior secondary education and pre-university education) (De Graaf, et al., 2012). Further, we asked about a recent (i.e. previous week) experience instead of retrospectively reporting about the last few months or years. It could be that experiences within a romantic relationship are more profound in the everyday lives of young people going steady with someone, because of the manifested and repetitive nature of these experiences.

Contrary to the general idea and our expectations based on the research literature (Doornwaard et al., 2014; Feiring, 1996; McIsaac et al., 2008; Montgomery, 2005), the girls in the current study did not report more about romantic topics than boys did, nor did boys report more about sexual activities than girls did. According to our results, girls spontaneously report more about romantic *and* sexual experiences than boys do, although boys who do report about romantic and sexual topics express topics similar to those reported by girls. It seems that in *everyday life* boys and girls do not differ in their qualitative expressions of romantic and sexual experiences.

Overall, older participants were more inclined to report romantic and sexual topics in their diaries. Contrary to our expectations, however, the reports shared by older participants did not reflect a higher stage of romantic developmental or level of sexual activities. The experiences of older participants reflected all stages of romantic development (i.e. from less to more advanced experiences).

Previous research showed that, as young people grow older, they are more open to talk about sexuality with their parents (Morgan, Thorne, & Zurbruggen, 2010). Maybe young people at an older age have fewer difficulties in disclosing sex-related information to others and, therefore, they tend to report more about their experiences in a diary study than younger individuals.

According to our results, when young people cross the line and actual interact with current or potential romantic partners (i.e. physical (sexual) contact, romantic affiliations with Contact, and romantic relationships), they evaluate their experiences as more positive. In contrast, young people reporting about thoughts and fantasies (i.e. romantic affiliation) evaluate their experiences as mixed (i.e. both negative and positive). This finding is consistent with our expectations, based on the research literature (Jackson et al., 2001; Nieder & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001; Richards et al., 1998). Because of the cross-sectional nature of the data, we do not know whether the young people in the initial stage will become more positive when they approach a potential romantic partner. Future longitudinal research could examine whether positive evaluations precede or follow interactions with (potential) romantic partners.

The findings concerning positive evaluations of sexual contact are consistent with previous research (O'Sullivan & Hearn, 2008; Vasilenko et al., 2012). Clearly, young Dutch people in our study evaluate everyday experiences of (desires for) sexual contact positively.

Further analysis of the diary reports identified "Making Contact" as a profound theme within the everyday romantic and sexual experiences of young people; however, how this theme was expressed differed across specific romantic and sexual experiences. Some participants who reported solely thoughts and fantasies (i.e. romantic affiliations) expressed insecurity with regard to Making Contact. In contrast, participants reporting higher romantic developmental stages (i.e. romantic affiliation with Contact and romantic relationships) and physical sexual behavior largely expressed self-confidence. This finding highlights the importance for future research to focus on making contact in different romantic and sexual experiences.

Boys reporting romantic affiliations expressed only confidence in a direct approach towards a potential romantic partner, whereas girls reported both confidence and hesitation. Although research shows boys being more direct in approaching potential romantic partners (Jackson et al., 2001), this finding should be interpreted with caution because only three boys reported about romantic affiliations. Future research could examine this difference between boys and girls within a larger sample.

4.2. Strengths, limitations, and future directions

This research is exploratory and not without limitations. One limitation has to do with the small sample size and the recruitment of participants from one secondary vocational school in the Northern part of the Netherlands. The sample consisted of primarily native-Dutch heterosexual pre-vocational high school students. Therefore, the results may not be representative for all young Dutch people. Notwithstanding the small sample size, the use of open-ended questions in our diary study allowed us to explore unique information about a broad range of emerging romantic and sexual experiences, as expressed by young people in their own words. For example, few large-scale studies have focused on the romantic affiliations of young people and how they make contact. This mixed-methods diary study could be a suitable means of examining more nuanced experiences of romantic and sexual development in everyday life, which could lead to the construction of a relevant framework for questionnaires using a larger sample.

Another limitation is that the participants could have been influenced by the topic examples given in the diary. Because these examples were presented in general terms (e.g. "romantic relationships"), their influence is likely to have been less than would have been the case with specific situational examples. In addition, we asked participants to write about a recent personally relevant issue which makes the priming effect less profound than in traditional questionnaires. Moreover, the

diaries contained unique everyday experiences which were both related and unrelated to sexuality, indicating that the participants wrote about any recent experience which was of fundamental importance at that time.

The setting of the study could explain the reluctance of some participants to write about romantic and sexual experiences. Although precautions were taken to ensure privacy while completing the one-week diary, the classroom setting could have discouraged some young people from writing about their romantic and sexual experiences. The group-wise setting could also account for that some of the participants wrote only short accounts of their sexual experiences. The future diary study may allow young people to complete the diaries at a place and time that suit them best. For example, in an individual setting, participants' peers do not have to know that they are participating in the diary study. In addition, young people could be more triggered to write more elaborate stories by adding several questions to the diary (e.g. about the individuals involved or the place of the experience).

Many of the participants, both girls and boys, were interested in the two-year diary study. From the perspective of the young people, the primary argument for not participating had to do with the intensity of the study design, and not the privacy-sensitive research topic. These results suggest that potential participants in a two-year diary study are likely to differ from those who do not participate with regard to commitment and conscientiousness, but not necessarily according to openness concerning sex-related topics. To constrain the drop-out rate in the future diary study, it is important to recruit young people who are motivated to commit to the study for a two-year period.

In sum, this study reveals valuable support for the future implementation of a forthcoming two-year diary study. The outcomes resulted in several changes to the future diary research in order to enhance its feasibility. In addition, the explorative results of this study concerning young people's everyday romantic and sexual topics and how these topics are experienced could be of importance for researchers to obtain valid information about the romantic and sexual experiences of young people in their everyday lives. The results of this study suggest directions for future research. First, future investigations could devote further attention to similarities between the everyday romantic and sexual experiences of boys and girls (Hyde, 2005). Such information could be of considerable importance to sex education programs, which tend to focus on differences between the experiences of girls and boys.

Second, the results of our study indicate that older and more experienced young people are more concerned with romantic and sexual topics in everyday life. In practice, however, parents and educators are encouraged to provide information to young people beginning at a young age (European Expert Group on Sexuality Education, 2015). More research about *emerging* romantic and sexual development may gain knowledge to help parents and educators to start sex education at a young age.

Last, our study showed that initial romantic experiences seemed to be experienced with mixed feelings and insecurities. At the onset of their sexual development, young people shape their behavior, norms, and opinions through real-life interactions. It could be more crucial to influence young people in this initial period than it is in later stages, when their behavior, norms, and opinions have already been formed. Future diary research on the transition from less to more interest in romantic and sexual experiences could be particularly interesting for purposes of informing the timing of sexual health interventions.

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